

COVID-19 did not create distrust in science. It scaled it up.

Vaccine hesitancy long predates the pandemic. In 2019 the WHO named it one of the ten leading threats to global health.

BEFORE COVID-19

A relatively contained concern

- Largely about childhood immunisation
- Decisions made by a specific group, parents, and often mothers
- A bounded population, limited public and political salience



WITH COVID-19

Accelerated, broadened, politicised

- Whole-of-population vaccination put every adult in the decision
- Concern spread across generations, not just parents
- It fused with a wider infodemic and became a matter of public and political identity

The harder problem was never only vaccines. It was uncertainty.

During the pandemic, the real test of trust was communicating science that was genuinely uncertain and constantly changing (routes of transmission, masking, asymptomatic spread, what vaccines could and could not do).

The dilemma: revising guidance as evidence improves is the essence of good science, yet in public it can read as error, or even concealment. Science earns authority by changing its mind; publics under stress often expect certainty.

AND TRUST IS NOT SIMPLY A MATTER OF INFORMATION

Even where measured vaccine confidence was low, uptake was often high where providers, local institutions and social norms carried trust. **Trust is relational and institutional, not something correcting facts alone can secure.**

Which is why “losing the public” is too blunt a description. **What we call “trust in science” is not one thing, and during COVID-19 its parts moved in different directions.**

It is not one thing. It has layers, and they moved apart.

From a public health vantage, “trust in science” bundles together at least four distinct things:

- 1 **The findings** trust that the science itself is sound
- 2 **The experts** trust in scientists and clinicians who explain it
- 3 **The institutions** trust in the authorities who turn science into rules
- 4 **The messenger next to you** your own doctor, community and social norms

The core problem was conflation. Because policy was framed as “simply following the science,” distrust in a contested response spilled onto science itself. Disentangling these layers is where our discussion can begin.